

Surface Rites

Do the people who build, pay for and love a church have no say in its destiny?

by Curtis Gillespie

Local myth tells us that it was the beloved Father Albert Lacombe, missionary to the Cree and Blackfoot, who picked the site for the church at the turn of the last century. Though he was based out of nearby Pincher Creek at the time, the peripatetic Lacombe would have regularly travelled back and forth across these rolling, stunning ranch lands, out near Twin Butte and Hillspring, just minutes from Waterton Park. And so when a group of the area's ranching faithful—the Bonertzes, the Klunkers, the Bruders, the Speths, the Hochsteins—let it be known to the Church that they desired their own parish, and moreover were willing and able to secure the land and build the building,

Lacombe knew exactly where to put the structure that in 1907 Bishop Legal would consecrate as St. Henry's Catholic Church.

The Speth family—still prominent in the area today—donated the 10-acre plot on top of the area's highest hill, with Chief Mountain and the massive roll and thunder of the Rockies as a looming backdrop to the west and south, the black-topped Porcupine Hills to the north, and to the east—in a never-ending vista—the limitless prairie merging toward a diffuse horizon. Though a humble building, St. Henry's is as awe-inspiring as Notre Dame in Paris or St. Peter's in Rome. If you are among those who choose to believe God created this world, there

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is no better seat from which to appreciate that creation. St. Henry's has stood on its promontory for nearly a hundred years now, a beacon and landmark, a historical treasure that even in the words of the local Mormon congregation is "one of the most stunning sights in all of southern Alberta...one of those rare places that seem to belong to all of us."

Not that any of this was enough to keep St. Henry's open. In the summer of 2001, following the recommendations of the Calgary Diocesan Planning Commission, St. Henry's was formally closed, though the property and graveyard will be maintained for possible future uses by, for instance, monastic orders. The parishioners of St. Henry's must now travel to St. Michael's in Pincher Creek to attend mass. St. Henry's is no longer an active parish—that much is clear. Less clear is the validity and appropriateness of the manner in which the diocese arrived at its decision.

Lois Johnston is a vibrant, gray-haired woman, and she doesn't seem at all bothered by the bitterly cold February wind knifing across the barren land as we step through the snow toward the St. Henry's graveyard. Johnston lives in Hillspring, a few miles east of St. Henry's. She's been a lifelong member of the St. Henry's congregation, despite having lived abroad for a time, and she is now a member of the Historical Society of St. Henry's Church, a group that has been a mosquito buzzing in the ear of Calgary's Bishop Frederick Henry. Family history relates that it was Lois's grandfather, Fred Klunker, who camped on site in the summer of 1907 to help build St. Henry's, and that when it was time to erect the steeple cross, he climbed to the top and secured it during a severe wind storm.

"How's this for sad and ironic," says Johnston through the wind, pointing first to the far corner of the cemetery and then to a fresh grave at the centre. "The first person ever buried in this graveyard was a Bonertz killed in a farming accident. That was 1907. The most recent," she nods at the fresh grave, which has a calving rope laid across it, "just a few weeks ago...a Bonertz killed in a farming accident."

Johnston's partner, Gus, and their dog, Popcorn, come toward us through the snow and together we go into St. Henry's. The door to this humble and beautiful church is unlocked, and always has been. "Can you imagine?" said

Cyril Bonertz later that day. Bonertz is a shy, soft-spoken man of 80 years who was baptized in St. Henry's, and whose now-deceased sister was baptized by Father Lacombe. It was the nephew of Cyril's grandchildren who was killed in the recent farming accident. "Nearly a hundred years old, that church, and not once has there been a lock on that door. How's that for respect?"

Early in 2000 the Diocese of Calgary embarked on its Diocesan Planning Commission. This was the first link in a chain of ill relations, because it was the first formal sign to the parishioners of St. Henry's that the parish was on the diocese's reformational radar. The planning commission's mandate made that clear. The commission was formed to examine the issue of "parish transformation," which meant taking a hard look at the "vitality and viability of each parish" and to then submit strategies to "restructure the diocese." Relative to St. Henry's, this meant the commission would ask whether there was enough activity—masses, marriages, baptisms, prayer groups, outreach programs etc.—to warrant maintaining it as an active parish. The commission's answer to this question would eventually be No.

A commission document describes the phases to be undertaken. Phase II, entitled "Public Process," was to "undertake a public information and discussion/input program on the research and the models and to incorporate as appropriate the input received from the Catholic community into the final report of the commission."

Never mind the telling use of the phrase "as appropriate"; the more important point is the degree to which the diocese engaged in genuine consultation. "It was a done deal," says Gus disgustedly as we sit in the kitchen of the home he shares with Johnston. A fish he caught that morning was jumping and wriggling in the sink.

"I think that's right," says Johnston, nodding. "There was no public consultation of any significance."

"And why?" says Gus. "That's the real question. Why wasn't there any real consultation?"

The answer was not forthcoming from the diocese, except through an acknowledgement of the swiftness of the process. Father Long Vu, the parish priest at St. Michael's says: "It doesn't do anyone any good to prolong the process. If we prolong the process, then it's even more painful."

The process may have been swift, but it was also conducted more in the spirit of the Soviet Politburo than of a free democracy. Shari Narine, a reporter with the *Pincher Creek Echo*, tried to attend a meeting at St. Henry's in the fall of 2000 at which the parishioners were going to be apprised of the planning commission's mandate and process. Narine was booted out. "It was a meeting specifically to talk about the whole process of church closures," she recalls. "When (the parish priest) Father Vu saw me sitting in one of the pews, he came up and asked me to leave. I was shocked. I asked him why I had to leave and he said it was because I wasn't a member of the congregation. I remember it being quite a hostile atmosphere."

St. Henry's parishioners were afraid St. Henry's was going to suffer a fate similar to the church in Coleman, in the Crowsnest Pass, which the diocese had shut down and sold off, banishing it to a future as a café and trinket shop. Narine, writing in the *Pincher Creek Echo*, recorded Johnston as saying that many St. Henry's parishioners simply wanted to see the church stay open, even if it meant going to one mass a month or having some sort of parishioners' group purchase the building. "We could maintain the building and what's inside," said Johnston. "We could maybe have visiting priests or mass said on special occasions. We don't want the property sold. It means that much to us."

Father Jack Pereira, who was on the Diocesan Planning Commission, suggested that such a sale might even be possible, though he was unable to say whether it would be for market value or for a token amount. It's "beyond me" to determine it, said Father Pereira, adding that ultimately it was "Bishop Henry's decision." Another member of the planning commission, Father Schuster, told concerned parishioners in a letter that such a sale could not take place unless it was to a formal and recognized society. This hastened the formation of the Historical Society.

Ron Schmidt, now chair of the Historical Society, said at the time, "We're grown people; we can accept that there are not enough priests. But the real issue here is the disposition of the property." Schmidt had added that it is simply "out of respect to our forefathers that we need to keep that cemetery as ongoing."

But then things took on a much different tone. People started saying "Not only do I not like what might get recommended, I don't like the way they're telling us about it, either."

An instigating factor in the souring of relations was clearly the formation of the Historical Society of St. Henry's Church. Between November 2000 and July 2001, relations between Bishop Henry and the parishioners of St. Henry's (or at least those who were fighting to keep it open, which was the majority) went south. The recommendation for closure of the church had gone through according to the Diocesan Planning Commission, and the report of the commission was sitting on the desk of Bishop Henry, awaiting his ratification.

Dozens of concerned parishioners wrote the bishop throughout the fall of 2000 and the early months of 2001, expressing their fears for their parish. Some even expressed their doubts as to the diocese's consultation and decision-making process. One parishioner wrote to the bishop, "It has been said that there was consultation with the people of the diocese. I have yet to talk to anyone who was consulted by the commission or their own priest. I was involved last fall in Calgary where I thought it was going to be a planning and brainstorming day for parishes. What it turned out to be was a talk on the process and what the bishop's vision was. The way to make proper change is not to make the change and then consult, but the other way around."

And it wasn't just Catholic parishioners who were pleading with Bishop Henry to see the light during the Diocesan Planning Commission's deliberations. The Mormons' Hillspring ward wrote to the bishop suggesting that perhaps closing the church might be short-sighted, and that the current Catholic strategy of centralization—closing down smaller mission churches so that parishioners must travel long distances to attend mass—"does not make sense." They go on to state that their own research has shown a direct correlation between "church activity and church proximity." In other words, people go to church if they have a church nearby, but don't go to church if they have to drive an hour to get there.

One correspondent, a St. Henry's parishioner from one of the area's most established families, told the bishop, "God's people built St. Henry's. Please let God's people decide its fate."

The final report of the Diocesan Planning Commission was delivered to Bishop Henry sometime early in 2001. Among many other recommendations it stated in no uncertain terms that the "mission church" of Twin Butte, St. Henry's, was to close, "with appropriate disposal of assets."

Once the final report of the planning commission had been put on the desk of Bishop Henry, the direct communication between the parishioners and the bishop's office took on an increasingly poisonous tone. Further raising the tension of the locals was the suspicion that Mr. Chan, the diocese's financial officer in charge of disposal of church assets, had been on the site with the bishop to ascertain the sales potential of the parish and grounds. The concerned parties felt they hadn't been listened to. The bishop felt that his will—which he necessarily interpreted as the will of the Church—wasn't being obeyed with sufficient respect. The correspondence that followed between the society and the bishop is a sad admixture of authoritarianism and injured resolve. Lester Hochstein's family homesteaded in the area at the turn of the last century, and St. Henry's is visible from the road into their ranch. He's a thoughtful, plain-spoken man, and he perhaps summarized it most accurately when he said of the whole affair, "It just brought out the worst in everybody."

The first thing to happen, of course, was the formal closure of St. Henry's. After mass at St. Michael's on July 7 a decree was read out in which the bishop stated, "I hereby canonically suppress" the mission church of St. Henry's.

Then, on August 9 of last year, Lois Johnston, writing as the vice-chair of the society, implored Bishop Henry not to sell the church and dispose of its assets as the planning commission had recommended. She apologized for pestering the bishop, but insisted on the uniqueness of St. Henry's, not just as a Catholic church, but as a monument to the pioneering history of the area. She even suggested that, should the building in fact be stripped of its ecclesiastical purpose, the society would be honoured to maintain St. Henry's at no cost to the diocese.



The response from Bishop Henry was swift. Four days later he wrote Johnston, informing her that he knew nothing about a Historical Society, and adding that she seemed to be “misinformed on a number of key points.” After reiterating that a proper process was, in his estimation, followed, he stated that although the church was to remain formally closed, “we will not be disposing of it or its contents at this time.” This was hardly the assurance St. Henry’s parishioners were looking for, especially given their nearly total lack of inclusion in the process and the swiftness with which it had been conducted.

Johnston wrote back to the bishop on August 17. In this letter she expressed her surprise that he had not heard of the society, since they had informed both Father Vu and Father Schuster of its formalization, and it had been formed at the suggestion of Father Schuster in the first place, who also happened to be Bishop Henry’s personal secretary at the time. She also informed the bishop that the society had been formed simply in “preparation for a possible ownership of this site,” (which they had discovered, she noted, was not possible due to the strict ownership regulations surrounding sites designated as cemeteries). On September 11, Johnston wrote the bishop another note to inform him that a group of 34 parishioners had gathered at St. Henry’s a few days earlier for a pot-luck lunch with the ostensible purpose of reading out the bishop’s previous letter stating the church was not to be sold at this time. She added that a work bee was planned for September 22 to mow the church grass, repaint the outside door and perform general cleaning.

Bishop Henry’s next missive, dated September 17, was less than enthusiastic about the activities of the society, though it’s important to note that the society members comprise only a fraction of the parishioners. “You appear not to have understood the substance of my previous letter,”

said the bishop bluntly. “St. Henry’s Church is formally closed. The Historical Society is not to use the church for any purpose. The Historical Society does not own the church, nor is it to assume any responsibility for management.” He attached a copy of the canonical letter of formal closure for St. Henry’s.

Immediately, Johnston replied in a highly apologetic letter which explained the formation of the society and how Father Schuster had effectively endorsed the idea. She clarified the misunderstanding over any notion that the society “manage” the parish, and reiterated that she and her fellow society members and other concerned parishioners were merely trying to respond positively to a trying situation, and that they now viewed themselves as active members of St. Michael’s in Pincher Creek who simply wished to preserve the spirit and heritage of St. Henry’s.

Though the society and other concerned parishioners had to that point been less than impressed with the bishop’s ability to heal rifts, his response to Johnston’s letter of apology might stand forever in this area as an object lesson in how to drive away the faithful. “I do not acknowledge ‘The Historical Society of St. Henry’s Church,’” he wrote. “The formation of the same was both premature and ill-advised, as you seem to be operating not in concert with the diocese, nor with St. Michael’s, I would suggest that you disband, as the group serves no useful purpose. Again, I agree with you that communication has been and is a major difficulty. For some reason you’re still offside. Your group seems much better at talking than listening.” The bishop goes on to inform Johnston that he checked up on them with Father Vu, who informed him that they hadn’t yet been active parishioners at St. Michael’s. “Given all of the above,” concludes the bishop, “I am surprised that you thought all of your activities were so positive and should have been welcomed by Fr. Long Vu and the Pastoral Council.”

This was too much for Johnston, who was so emotionally overwrought that Ron Schmidt, a rancher with long-time family history in the area, and the society’s chairman, had to take over communications with the bishop. In his long and passionate letter dated October 17 he asked the bishop how it was possible for him not to acknowledge something (the society) that his own office, through Father Schuster, had suggested. Schmidt then cuts to the core of the suspicions of the local faithful of St. Henry’s writing that perhaps it was premature of the bishop to suppose that the diocese “could sell a piece of property declared a cemetery, and that you could do so without opposition.”

On the topic of miscommunication, Schmidt goes on to say, “As my mother told me: ‘I had better have my own kitchen clean before criticizing someone else’s.’ I need to tell you that communication has not been the greatest from your direction also.” After subtly reminding the bishop of his, Schmidt’s, own record of faith, Schmidt closes by saying, “I assure you that we as a group are trying to demonstrate good stewardship. If you feel that we are failing, please lead us along the right path. However, like

my cattle, we are more effectively led than pushed.”

In the final communication from Bishop Henry, a letter on November 2, the prelate chastised Schmidt from the start. “I would be less than honest if I said that I was happy with the tone and much of the content (of your letter). At times you protest too much and seem to be intent upon self-justification. Your aggressive style is uncalled for, counterproductive and changes nothing.” Then, ignoring most of the points Schmidt highlighted, Henry resorts to cross-examining Schmidt on his participation in the life of St. Michael’s parish, and finds him lacking. He closes with, “Wishing all the best, I remain, Sincerely yours in Christ. F. B. Henry. Bishop of Calgary.”

The locals suspect that the bishop intended to sell the church site to the highest bidder, for the rumoured sum of \$300,000, but that the graveyard issue prevented him, since only a church, municipality or registered cemetery management group can own graveyards. This was the Diocesan Planning Commission’s major mistake: recommending selling a property that contained a graveyard. I asked Father Vu if the church ever tried to sell the church or intended to sell it. “It’s not my authority to say whether we ever wanted to sell it or not.” Bishop Henry is more sanguine on the question. “The planning commission recommended selling it, but I said no to that idea. It’s a superb site, and we would love nothing more than to have, for instance, the Carmelites or the Trappists come in and use it as a contemplative retreat.”

But it remains closed for use by the former parishioners of St. Henry’s and the Historical Society. Bishop Henry stated vigorously in a recent interview that St. Henry’s was simply not a viable parish. “It’s not just about mass,” he said. “It’s about many other things, about the various ministries of a parish—births, marriages, and so on. Mass is just one thing, and these people who wanted it to remain open, they just want mass, that’s all. They’re just consumers.”

After Bishop Henry’s letter of November 2, 2001, there has been no further communication between the parties. The community remains shocked by the behaviour of the diocese. Some members of the St. Henry’s congregation have simply moved on, have chosen to accept and stay out of it, but these are few and far between. “It’s hard to believe,” says Cyril Bonertz, in nearly a whisper. “I can’t imagine what this bishop is up to. We respected all the other bishops, but not this one.”

Yes, Bishop Henry was happy to go on record as saying that St. Henry’s will not be sold, and that the site will be lovingly maintained. And though he remains openly dismissive of the Historical Society, it seems clear that the society played a role in protecting the future of St. Henry’s. This is a victory of sorts for all those who love St. Henry’s, Catholic or not, though the word “victory” is best used sparingly when linked to a group in opposition to Bishop Henry. Such confrontational language might be precisely the spur required to

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change his mind, and this showdown style is not how the society and St. Henry’s former parishioners wish to continue. As one former St. Henry’s congregant said in language so emblematic of the southern Alberta rancher: “You’d better be careful whose toes you step on today, because they might be connected to the ass you have to kiss tomorrow.”

Hundreds of people were affected by the closure of St. Henry’s. A Diocesan Planning Commission spent, apparently, considerable time weighing the closure’s spiritual and actual meaning. Catholics and non-Catholics alike were involved. Everyone’s blood pressure was raised. And yet it boiled down to the decision of one man, Bishop Henry, a man who had never visited the parish prior to the planning commission’s deliberations on closing it. How can this be logical or right? St. Henry’s might already have been scrap lumber had the planets not aligned fortuitously.

One might ask in the end, what is the point of a church? And what is the role of a parish within its diocese? Does a grouping of parishes create a diocese? Or is a diocese created to impose a structure of worship for its members? We know where Bishop Henry stands, and we know where the parishioners of St. Henry’s stand; it is not side by side. Though the Catholic Church has been attacked and vilified on many fronts, with varying degrees of justification, there can’t be much denying that the Church has always been and remains a deeply paternalistic institution: We know what’s best for you and you have to trust us when we tell you something.

Yes, faith will always be more than a building, but faith is also more than merely doing as you’re told. Blood, sweat, tears, history and ancestry must always inform the construction of the buildings in which we choose to house our religious observance. Not to acknowledge the various and valid claims of ownership to these buildings is worse than blindness. It’s bad faith.

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